

What's Up, DOC?

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Former Farmer is Pick of the Crop

Brian Leahy Named to Head DLRP

When **Brian Leahy** was in his 20s, his dream was to create an agricultural utopia in the Central Valley: biologically diverse, verdant, productive farmland shielded from development.

"The farmland there is just incredible, a gift from God," said Leahy, a longtime farmer himself.

Now, as the newly named chief of the Division of Land Resource Protection, Leahy, 50, has downsized his goals a bit, although his ultimate aim remains protecting farmland. The population of the Central Valley has grown at a phenomenal rate in the last couple of decades, and there are now many more houses and strip malls than fruit stands.

"The challenge we face these days is figuring out how to accommodate growth while allowing farming in the future," he said. "The fortunate thing is that people are more and more starting to value having access to locally grown food. That appreciation can help us build our programs."

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Leahy on August 30, and Leahy's first day in the office was September 5. Well versed in DLRP programs because of his background

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Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman (left) swears in Brian Leahy as head of DLRP. Holding the Bible is Leahy's fiancée, Tina Cannon.

as both a Williamson Act landowner and former executive director of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts (CARCD), Leahy has hit the ground running.

"Brian was a rancher for 20 years and has worked with a number of agricultural organizations," Director **Bridgett Luther** said. "He also has a background in the law. His diverse experience

gives him a unique perspective that will help our efforts.

"I want to also thank **Dennis O'Bryant** (head of the Williamson Act program) for his service in the capacity as acting assistant director. Dennis has helped DLRP and the department through some controversial policy and program implementation issues."

Before joining a start-up company, EcoFacilitation, as interim development director last January, Leahy worked closely with DLRP and many of the division's constituents in his capacity with CARCD. Leahy also has connections at the Department of Fish and Game; his fiancée, **Tina Cannon**, is an environmental attorney there. They plan to marry next July.

"She has a 12-year-old son (Cameron), and I'm experiencing the joys and challenges of raising a boy for the first time," Leahy said.

Leahy has two grown daughters. His eldest, Whalin, spent two years working on farms in Europe after graduating from college and is now going to medical school. His youngest, Thea, was a student at Tulane University in New Orleans who transferred to Chico State University after Hurricane Katrina.

From 2000-2004, Leahy was president of California Certified Organic Farmers, a nonprofit organization that certifies 1,200 members representing about \$1 billion in organic sales. He helped the organization expand its market and its outreach to the public.

Leahy has been on the board of directors of the Organic Trade Association, a member of the California Biotechnology Task Force Advisory Committee, and has served in a wide variety of positions with groups interested in agricultural issues in California and Nebraska.

"I feel well prepared for this new challenge and look forward to working with the great people at DLRP who have done so much for agriculture in California," Leahy said.

While about 17 million acres are enrolled in the Williamson Act program, which grants landowners a potential tax break for a commitment to keep their land in agricultural use, Leahy thinks building DLRP's constituency will be one of his chief challenges.

"The Williamson Act is a huge deal because it touches so much – agriculture, growth, habitat, open space," he said. "But still, relatively few people know about us. We have to sell our programs, market the things we do. For example, our Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program creates incredible maps for the agricultural and planning communities. But we also can make inroads with the environmental, recreation and health communities."

It was, quite literally, a grassroots position that perhaps best prepared Leahy to head DLRP. From 1980-2001, he owned Cherokee Ranch, Inc. in Chico, a 900-acre rice farm on the cutting edge of the organic and biodiversity movement. If anyone knows that farmers can have a tough row to hoe – and that DLRP's programs can help – it's Leahy.

"I learned to farm from my father-in-law at the time," Leahy said. "He told me, 'You need a strong back and a good constitution.' Farming is like any small- or medium-sized business. It's tough. You have to put a lot into it. It's capital-intensive and it's hard to make enough money.

"In the United States, especially in California, farmers compete with people who don't face the same costs they face. I was in Ecuador earlier this summer. They grow roses there that are sold in the U.S. They have 365 days a year of sunshine and pay \$2 a day to their workers, which is a living wage there. That's tough competition for California growers."

In the early '90s, Leahy moved to Nebraska for a few years so his then-wife could attend medical school at Creighton University in Omaha. Leahy continued to farm ... briefly.



"I would go out at 5 a.m. to feed the cows and it was something like 40-below," he said. "One day, I came home and a friend of my wife's was talking about law school. I had farmed fulltime until I was 40 years old. After you've spent the day breaking up silage with a pickax to feed the cows, law school sounds pretty good."

Leahy earned his Juris Doctor at Creighton in 1997 and was admitted to practice law in Nebraska and Illinois. He worked for a time for the Legal Aid Society in Omaha.

"I was never interested in doing corporate law or criminal law," he said. "When I was farming, it was pretty clear that there was a need for people who understand farming to help formulate policy. Legal Aid was an interesting place to be. My first day, I went to court, then came back and painted my office. I was in front of the state supreme court arguing a case a year out of law school. I was working with people who clearly needed the help – kids caught in the system, the mentally ill ... I didn't get rich, but it was very satisfying work."

Leahy thinks he'll find a similar satisfaction heading DLRP.

"As a society, we don't value food or the people who produce it enough," he said. "Too often, it is only after farmland has been lost in a community that people begin to appreciate the many values that farmland and open space bring. Being with DLRP, I have an opportunity to help people better understand how important agriculture is to us all."

Leahy thinks about agriculture constantly. Last weekend, he mulled the question of where the state's next generation of farmers would come from ... while swimming from Alcatraz to Aquatic Park in San Francisco. Leahy has completed the 1.5-mile swim three times. In the most recent race, he was fifth in his age group and 59th overall among the 600 swimmers in 38 minutes.

"There was a criminal who escaped from Alcatraz, and you swim the route they believe he took from the island to shore," Leahy said. "There's a pretty strong current part of the way, but there was an 8-year-old out there and someone 78 years old out there, so it can be done."

While Leahy's new role with DLRP isn't a sink-or-swim situation, he'll bring to the job the intensity and determination that served him well as a high school swimmer specializing in the difficult butterfly stroke.

"I was the most improved swimmer on the team three years in a row, then I finally made allleague as a senior," he said with a laugh. "It took me some time, but I eventually figured it out. Hopefully it will work out that way here, too."